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**TITLE:**

**Storytelling in Different Media: The Narrative Strategies of *Fight Club* and *Mr. Robot***

**STUDENT'S NAME: Maria Guallar Comas**

**TUTOR'S NAME: Dra Gemma López**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Nowadays stories can be told in many different ways. There is a wide variety of art media, all of which have different techniques at their disposal to propel a narrative forward. The aim of this work is to look at two different works of two different art media (the novel *Fight Club* and the television show *Mr. Robot*) and analyse the narrative strategies they use that are unique to their medium, with a special focus on the way in which the identity of the protagonists is written.

Keywords: storytelling, media, *Fight Club*, *Mr. Robot*

## **RESUM**

Avui en dia les histories poden ser explicades de moltes maneres diferents. Hi ha una gran varietat de mitjans artístics, i tots tenen tècniques diferents a la seva disposició per poder tirar una narrativa cap a endavant. L'objectiu d'aquest treball és observar dues obres de dos mitjans artístics diferents (la novel·la *Club de lluita* i la sèrie de televisió *Mr. Robot*) i analitzar les estratègies narratives que utilitzen i són úniques del seu mitjà, amb un focus especial en la forma en la que la identitat dels protagonistes és escrita.

Paraules clau: narració, mitjans, *Club de lluita*, *Mr. Robot*

# Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Analysis.....</b>	<b>2</b>
2.1. <i>Fight Club</i> .....	2
2.1.1. Repetition of formulaic sentences.....	2
2.1.2. Dialogue markers.....	5
2.1.3. The page.....	8
2.2. <i>Mr. Robot</i> .....	10
2.2.1. Point of view.....	11
2.2.1.1. Distortion of reality.....	11
2.2.1.2. Soundtrack narration.....	15
2.2.2. Shot composition.....	17
<b>3. Conclusions.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Reference List.....</b>	<b>27</b>

# 1. Introduction

Storytelling is always evolving and adapting to the times. New artistic movements tend to push its limits and go beyond what has already been written, but the apparition of brand new art media is what leads storytelling through the most radical changes. With the apparition of audiovisual media at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, a whole new world was opened when it came to storytelling. Film syntax added many new techniques to the table that were exclusive to its own medium (techniques such as editing and soundtrack) and separated it from other media such as literature or theatre. With the abundant technological advances of the turn of the century, the modern landscape of art is drastically different than it used to be, with a wide variety of media and techniques that allow writers to truly experiment with the tools they are working with. In this paper, I seek to analyse how two different writers of two different media use those tools to propel their narratives forward, and how the techniques that are unique to each medium are employed to create a compelling story.

The two texts that will be analysed in this paper are the 1996 novel *Fight Club* written by Chuck Palahniuk and the first season of the 2015 television show *Mr. Robot* written and directed by Sam Esmail. Both texts are very thematically rich and share many of their themes (themes of revolution, consumerism, isolation from society, etc.), but the main focus of the paper will be narrowed down to the identity of the protagonist of each text, as they both share the same psychological disorders and their sense of identity progresses in a similar manner, and both narratives use the strengths of their respective art medium very cleverly to convey that progress. With that common theme in mind, I will go through the various narrative strategies of the novel and the show and analyse how they showcase the mental state of each protagonist.

## 2. Analysis

### 2.1. *Fight Club*

Although *Fight Club* is mostly known for its film adaptation, I will be working with the original novel, as it has a very particular style and adaptation is not the topic of interest in this paper. In the novel, a nameless protagonist suffering from insomnia meets and befriends Tyler Durden, a charismatic yet mysterious man with whom he creates a club for men to fight each other in. The relatively harmless Fight Club eventually evolves into a full-blown terrorist project called Project Mayhem, and the protagonist, in an increasing conflict with Tyler, realises that Tyler is an alternate personality of his own that takes over his body whenever he goes to sleep. The complicated relationship between the narrator and Tyler, the narrator's fragile mental state and how Tyler's true identity is written and foreshadowed throughout the novel will be the narrative beats this paper focuses on.

#### 2.1.1. Repetition of formulaic sentences

A prominent stylistic choice Chuck Palahniuk makes when writing *Fight Club* is the repetition of several formulaic sentences that are introduced in a particular way, and then altered and repeated throughout the entire novel. One of the two most prominent ones we can find since the beginning of the novel is the structure: "You wake up at X". It is introduced at the beginning of the third chapter: "You wake up at Air Harbor International" (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 25) and on the very same page it is repeated several times, sometimes in succession, but normally in between paragraphs with different information.

"This is how I met Tyler Durden.

You wake up at O'Hare.

You wake up at LaGuardia.

You wake up at Logan." (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 25)

This structure is repeated many times throughout the same chapter, and thereafter it shows up less often but still is peppered all over the rest of the novel. As



long as the first words are “You wake up at”, then the last ones do not have to be a concrete place in every instance, e.g. “You wake up, and you’re nowhere”, “You wake up, and that’s enough” (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 33). However, each time this structure appears, it does so in its own paragraph, standing out in the page. It is visually recognisable, and besides creating a feeling of disorientation for the reader that is attuned to the tone and themes of the novel, it is very significant when it comes to reflecting the main character’s psyche. The constant repetition of this phrase coupled by the content of it — waking up, an unavoidable part of one’s day-to-day — reflects the sheer monotony of the protagonist’s life, and the cycle he is trapped in (a cycle he eventually tries to break out from through Tyler). The presence of this phrase is perpetual and powerful, and that reflects the inescapable nature of the life the protagonist is trapped in. On top of that, this phrase has a foreshadowing element: the main character of *Fight Club* suffers from a condition that seems to be Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), and whenever he falls asleep, his alternate personality, Tyler, takes over his body and runs amok. With that in mind, Palahniuk cleverly weaves these phrases in strategic places that maximise their meaning. For example, the chapter in which they are introduced is the exact same chapter in which the protagonist meets Tyler for the first time, just one of many subtle hints at how sleep and Tyler are connected.

The second formulaic structure that stands out the most in *Fight Club* is the one that begins on chapter 7, the chapter where Tyler first tells the protagonist that he and Marla Singer are sleeping together. In typical *Fight Club* fashion, the events that are happening to the protagonist are interwoven with another train of thought: a talk about the magazines he is reading. He narrates: “In the oldest magazines, there’s a series of articles where organs in the human body talk about themselves in the first person: I am Jane’s Uterus” (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 58), which is followed by:

“I am Joe’s Prostate.

No kidding, and Tyler comes to the kitchen table with his hickey and no shirt and says, blah, blah, blah, blah, he met Marla Singer last night and they had sex.

Hearing this, I am totally Joe’s Gallbladder.” (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 58)

This is the very first instance in which this structure appears, and it is immediately established that the narrator will alter that initial phrase to suit whatever his emotional state is at the moment. The chapter progresses, Tyler continues talking about Marla, and the narrator, overcome with jealousy, starts changing the body parts listed at the end of this structure into ones that fit body language that is related to anger or agitation (e.g. grinding teeth, flaring nostrils, white knuckles), but he does not stop at body parts, stretching the meaning of the structure as far as it can go: “I am Joe’s Enraged, Inflamed Sense of Rejection” (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 60).

This structure, once again, is repeated throughout the rest of the novel, and often self-contained in its own singular paragraph. Furthermore, the capitalisation of the initials makes it stand out even more on a visual level. As the other structure, this one is also tightly linked to the identity of the narrator and his relationship with Tyler. It is mostly used as a reaction to what Tyler says or does, but there are also instances in which it links the two characters together, pointing at the fact that they are one and the same:

“This is what Tyler wants me to do.

These are Tyler’s words coming out of my mouth.

I am Tyler’s mouth.

I am Tyler’s hands.” (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 155)

There are other phrases that are repeated throughout the novel, but those are not altered to fit different meanings and adapt to the situation, only repeated over and over again. An example of that would be the phrase “I know this because Tyler knows this”, straightforward in meaning, introduced on the very first chapter, and used first as foreshadowing and later on as a reminder of Tyler’s true identity. This phrase is usually written after the narrator explains a specific procedure on how to make something, and in the same way as the others, it is put on its own pace-breaking self-contained paragraph.

There is a lot to be said about the repetition in *Fight Club*, but while every repeated structured can be examined in detail, what stands out is the bigger picture of the novel. The life of the main character, both before and after he meets Tyler, is utterly

consumed by formulas: his lifestyle is repetitive whether he is trapped in a corporate world he does not believe in and can only escape by going to support groups he does not belong in, or he escapes that lifestyle and turns to going to their Fight Club every Friday, working on Project Mayhem as the orders are dished out, and so on and so forth. Even as Tyler, his life is nothing but a repetition of the same things; waking up and being himself, sleeping and becoming Tyler. Thus, the formal choice of constant repetition reflects the very core of the narrator's character.

### **2.1.2. Dialogue markers**

*Fight Club* uses dialogue markers in an unusual way, and while playing with dialogue markers is not something particularly groundbreaking, it is used in a very clever manner when it comes to telling the story of this novel. In *Fight Club*, whenever the narrator speaks, no dialogue markers are used, while inverted commas are used whenever the other characters are speaking. This is something that is reflected on the page and marks a visual distinction between the narrator and the other characters and, remarkably enough, it is a form of visual storytelling used in a media that does not employ those methods and tends to rely solely on the written word.

This stylistic choice is employed in a very interesting manner, especially when it comes to Tyler Durden. The main plot twist of the novel is the reveal that Tyler is nothing but a figment of the narrator's imagination, an alternate personality that has stemmed from his DID. This reveal happens towards the latter half of the novel, but there are many subtle hints scattered throughout every chapter that comes before the twist. The dialogue markers in particular are used to foreshadow the line between the narrator and Tyler, and how that line blurs together. Palahniuk sets an unwritten rule when he begins writing *Fight Club*: whenever the main character speaks, no inverted commas are used to mark his dialogue, but whenever Tyler speaks, he is treated like any other character and given those markers. Interactions with Tyler — and with any other character — usually read like this:

“Tyler said, ‘Surprise me.’

I said I had never hit anybody.

Tyler said ‘So go crazy, man.’

I said, close your eyes.

Tyler said, ‘No.’” (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 52)

This is the standard interaction when it comes to the style in which this book is written. However, in the very same page, something else is established:

“At the hospital, Tyler tells them I fell down.

Sometimes, Tyler speaks for me.

I did this to myself.” (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 52)

The first paragraph of this second excerpt is just an exhibit of indirect dialogue, so the lack of inverted commas is to be expected. However, what follows is significant. The sentence “Sometimes, Tyler speaks for me” isn’t only significant because of the plot point that it hints at (that Tyler and the narrator are the same person), but also because what follows, a bit of dialogue without any markers, is something that, supposedly, Tyler himself says. The narrator says that Tyler speaks for him, and the rule of who gets inverted commas in their dialogue and who does not is broken in the following paragraph. From that point forward, Tyler’s words blending into the narrator’s happens more and more, and this visual technique is used in varying manners depending on how the narrator’s identity is progressing in the story. It is often unclear whether Tyler or the narrator is speaking in these instances, but that just solidifies the blurred identity of the two characters even more.

At first, the lack of dialogue markers for Tyler’s speech is used whenever he is speaking for the narrator, as seen in the previous excerpt, or to say things that align with the narrator’s own life or feelings, for instance:

“Lying on our backs in the parking lot, staring up at one star that came through the streetlights, I asked Tyler what he’d been fighting.

Tyler said, his father.” (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 53)

The narrator’s father is an absent one in *Fight Club*. While his absence is not portrayed as something particularly traumatising when the narrator talks about it, there is quite a lot of importance placed in the figure of the father in this novel, especially when it comes to the construction of the masculine identity:

“The mechanic says, ‘If you’re male and you’re Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God?’

This is all Tyler Durden dogma.” (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 141)

Tyler has the idea that a man’s father is his model for God. Tyler is the one who is angry at the absence of his own father, but Tyler is the manifestation of the narrator’s repressed feelings and ideas; he is the ideal masculine man that takes what he wants and, in turn, what the narrator has always wanted. Therefore, when Tyler says that he had been fighting his father and no dialogue markers frame that dialogue, it is to be understood that that is the narrator’s own repressed desire, and that there is lingering anger about the abandonment he suffered as a child that is not shown by any other means — since he tells himself and, consequently, the readers that he has no issues that stemmed from that abandonment.

This particular strategy progresses in the same way that the narrator and his identity do. The moment the narrator becomes self-aware and finds out about Tyler’s true identity, the way in which the narrator’s dialogue blended in with the narration itself comes to the forefront, because when he says something that is, as usual, unmarked but not written as if he had spoken out loud, Tyler replies to it. The narrator might not have said it out loud and Tyler may just be hearing his thoughts, since he is a part of his own mind, but it is still as ambiguous as the rest of the dialogue is, and that ambiguity is the point of it all.

“So now that I know about Tyler, will he just disappear?

‘No,’ Tyler says, still holding my hand.” (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 168)

However, it is important to point out that, although this stylistic choice is very significant when it comes to Tyler and the protagonist, they’re not the only ones who break in and out of it at times. For instance, when the Project Mayhem members are threatening a commissioner to castrate him, his desperate pleas for mercy are broken up into their own paragraphs and do not have any inverted commas marking them, possibly comparing this man’s helplessness and desperation to the narrator’s, as the narrator himself goes through a similar situation later on.

“The commissioner said no.

And don’t.

Stop.

Please.

Oh.

God.

Help.

Me.” (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 165)

Towards the end of the novel, when the narrator is about to be castrated as well, there is an instance where he seems to gain a voice for a split second; that is, he speaks with dialogue markers. It is a peculiar moment, because he knows who Tyler really is at this point, and the men trying to castrate him are calling him by that name. Out of desperation, he reluctantly tries to assume the role of Tyler Durden to get them to stop, using Tyler’s powerful voice to get out of the situation. His only marked dialogue is the word “Hey!”, used repeatedly as a call for help. Using Tyler’s voice to speak out, however, turns out to be ultimately futile, and he cannot escape.

This kind of usage of dialogue markers is somewhat paradoxical. Palahniuk takes a technique that is inherent to the written word and uses it to tell a part of his story through visual means, thus employing written language in a unique way that adds another dimension to the identity struggles of the narrator. What these dialogues markers tell is unspoken, but integral to the story being told.

### **2.1.3. The page**

There is simultaneity of thoughts and events in *Fight Club* that is very evocative of editing in film. In the 2005 afterword that Chuck Palahniuk wrote for the novel, he talks about his creative process when writing the original short story that *Fight Club* originated from, and says: “There was just a short story. It was just an experiment to kill a slow afternoon at work. Instead of walking a character from scene to scene in a story, there had to be some way to just — cut, cut, cut. To jump. From scene to scene. Without

losing the reader. To show every aspect of a story, but only the kernel of each aspect. The core moment. Then another core moment. Then, another” (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 213). This stylistic choice is evident from the very first chapter of the novel, and this narrative style that often makes each page feel as if it is full of jump-cuts overpowers the novel and reflects the narrator’s fragmented mind in a very effective manner.

Let’s take, for example, the very first chapter of the novel. The first paragraph starts with “Tyler gets me a job as a waiter” (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 11), an event that happens relatively early-on in the novel, and then follows with “after that Tyler’s pushing a gun in my mouth and saying, the first step to eternal life is you have to die”, something that happens at the very last chapter. Then the protagonist narrates: “For a long time though, Tyler and I were best friends. People are always asking, did I know about Tyler Durden.” Just in the few first lines, we see many jumbled thoughts which are connected, but not chronological in the slightest. It is, if anything else, a realistic portrayal of how trains of thought really work – something significant in a novel where the state of mind of the narrator is so crucial to what happens around him. Furthermore, the fragmentation of the mind of the narrator and, consequently, the information in the page, is shown two paragraphs later, when he starts explaining how to make a gun silencer. As he narrates what could go wrong if you do not drill the holes correctly, Tyler keeps talking, and then the narrator says that the building they are in will explode in ten minutes and proceeds to explain how to make nitroglycerine. Immediately, he follows with the phrase “I know this because Tyler knows this” (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 12), which is then followed by an explanation on how to make bombs with nitroglycerine. These different topics that the narrator goes over are all interconnected: He starts with Tyler, who, at the moment, has a gun to his mouth, so he shifts to the topic of guns; Tyler pulls him back to their inevitable death, which brings him to talking about the building that will explode, which in turn takes him to the topic of bombs made with nitroglycerine. This goes on, the narration alternating between what is happening with Tyler and the building’s slow destruction, the ways of making weapons used for the terrorist attacks of Project Mayhem, and other thoughts like the members of the project or Marla. The paragraphs get shorter and shorter as the explosion draws near and, in turn, the narrator’s death does as well. He starts periodically counting down the minutes left for the bombs to go off, and the pace of the narration becomes quick and frantic, a perfect reflection of the narrator’s mental state.

“Five minutes.

Maybe we would become a legend, maybe not. No, I say, but wait.

Where would Jesus be if no one had written the gospels?

Four minutes.

I tongue the gun barrel into my cheek and say, you want to be a legend, Tyler, man, I’ll make you a legend. I’ve been here from the beginning.

I remember everything.

Three minutes.” (Palahniuk, 2006, p. 15)

These are the jumps from one core moment to the other that Palahniuk writes about: there are no stops or slow moments; it is rapid-fire and constant throughout the whole novel — maybe not to this extent every single time, but still present. There are no transitions in *Fight Club*, no “character gets from point A to point B” moments, just thoughts and events that are fully relevant to the story being told. This is exactly why *Fight Club* reads like a film, because Palahniuk uses narrative techniques that are either remarkably visual or that evoke the pace that editing in filmmaking creates — or both, in instances like this one, where the constant paragraph breaks and changes in topic are very visible in the page, but are also unique to the reading experience.

## **2.2. *Mr. Robot***

*Mr. Robot* is an unconcluded show with three aired seasons at the present time. The first season’s narrative is very self-contained, so that is the only one being analysed in the paper. In it, Elliot Anderson, a hacker that works in a cybersecurity company, is approached by a mysterious man dubbed Mr. Robot, another hacker from a group called F Society that asks Elliot to help them take down the largest corporation of the world. Elliot grapples with his mental illnesses and, at the height of his inner turmoil, discovers that Mr. Robot was a figment of his imagination with the appearance of his late father. This paper focuses on how Elliot’s relationship with Mr. Robot, his identity journey, and his fragile mental state are shown on the screen.



### 2.2.1. Point of View

In *How to Read a Film*, James Monaco states: “Point of view is easier to describe in prose narrative: novels are either narrated by someone in the story—the first-person narrator—or by someone outside of it—the omniscient narrator. [...] In its totality, film can fairly well duplicate these fictional models. Most films, like most novels, are told from an omniscient point of view. We see and hear whatever the author wants us to see and hear. But when we come to the first person-mode—which has proved so useful in prose fiction because of the resonances that can be developed between events and the character or persona of the narrator—problems arise in film. It’s easy enough to allow a film character to narrate the story. The difficulty is that we see what is happening as well as hear it. In the novel, in effect, we only hear it” (Monaco, 1977, p. 177).<sup>1</sup> This is a problem that affects all audiovisual media, but in *Mr. Robot*, writer and director Sam Esmail finds a few clever ways to distinctly convey point of view.

#### 2.2.1.1. Distortion of reality

The protagonist of the show, Elliot Anderson, is a man with several mental illnesses, one of which seems to be DID. Due to the delusions caused by this disorder and the amount of trauma and stress Elliot undergoes throughout the show, there are many instances in which the reality of *Mr. Robot* becomes completely distorted, some of them more mild than others, but all of them worth analysing. To begin with, Elliot completely despises a massive conglomerate called E Corp that rules over the capitalist world. He calls it “A perfect monster of modern society” (Esmail, 2015, ep. 1), and perceives it as the incarnation of pure evil. In his narration on the first episode, when he first introduces them, he dubs the corporation “Evil Corp”, and from that point onwards every character that speaks the name of the corporation will call it Evil Corp, without exception — there are a few instances in which we see written text where we can read the words “E Corp”, but they are always small details in the background that Elliot is not looking at and the viewer really has to strain their eye to notice. This is a perfect showing of how much Elliot’s perspective affects the reality shown to us on-screen, and a very consistent way of conveying point of view in an audiovisual media. In that very first episode, there is a scene where Elliot, excited about the revolution he has been

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<sup>1</sup> The APA stylesheet has been disregarded in formatting this quote because it is my intention to emphasise the visual aspect of the quotes from the primary texts being analysed.

asked to take a part in, looks at the billboards and advertisements around the street and in them sees text and images that seem to point to everything that is wrong with E Corp (a billboard of their own about student loans, an advertisement for a movie called “Villains”, etc.) which, to the viewer, are a clear exaggeration of reality from a person that only sees that evil.



**Figure 1.** Elliot looking at an E Corp billboard on episode 1 of *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015).

By this point in the show, it has already been established that Elliot is not mentally stable, and coupled with his obvious paranoia in the way he seems to believe there are people who are always following him, the portrayal of this moment feels over-the-top in an otherwise serious drama. By doing this and making every character say “Evil Corp” instead of “E Corp” since the very first episode, Esmail lulls the audience into a false sense of security that makes them feel like they know what is real and what is not; what Elliot perceives and, therefore, what the audience sees, may not always be reality, but that fake perception is portrayed in a way in which any viewer can discern it. This is clever because the distinction between reality and hallucination is never this clear again. Rather, the other times in which reality is distorted by Elliot, it is hardly as noticeable as it is in this first episode. On episode 4, Elliot undergoes severe hallucinations due to his drug withdrawal symptoms, and at first they are quite tame: he hallucinates Mr. Robot taking him to a house where he gets a shot of heroin and is then shot to death. Slowly but surely, those hallucinations evolve into something increasingly surreal (like him appearing on the TV screen he is watching, or his pet fish talking to

him), and they take up most the run-time of that episode. They are not as subtle as they are in the rest of the show, but the transition between reality and hallucination is so seamless that the viewer cannot tell when the hallucination truly started until Elliot wakes up in the same bed he was in at the beginning of the episode, rendering every event that happened since Mr. Robot took him out of the hotel not real. From this point forward, the viewer is left in a constant state of wondering what is real or what is not, and Elliot becomes the epitome of the classic unreliable narrator, but with images instead of with words alone.

The culmination of this distortion of reality happens, predictably enough, in the last scene of the finale of the first season. Elliot finds himself in the midst of a protest in which everyone is wearing an Fsociety mask, and in there he sees Mr. Robot, his mother, and his child self. We, as the audience, have already experienced the reveal that Mr. Robot has been a hallucination all along, and so we see those three people as fake. Having been subjected to quite a few scenes in which we see Elliot talking to Mr. Robot in public, and having even seen an instance in which the outer perspective of the scene is shown and we get to see Elliot fighting with himself, the audience focuses on that, and assumes that Elliot is there, and the only hallucination is his family.



**Figure 2.** Elliot pushing Mr. Robot against a wall in public. Taken from episode 10 of *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015).



**Figure 3.** The following shot of Elliot strangling himself, as seen from an outsider's point of view. Taken from episode 10 of *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015).

As the conversation goes on and the protest continues around them, this exchange happens:

“Elliot (in voice over): No, no. This isn't my family. None of them are real.

Mr. Robot: Neither is whoever you're talking to.

Elliot: You're not real. You're not real.

Mr. Robot: And what? You are? Is any of it real? I mean, look at this! Look at it! A world built on fantasy. [...] Real? You wanna talk about reality? We haven't lived in anything remotely close to it since the turn of the century. [...] You have to dig pretty deep, kiddo, before you can find anything real. We live in a kingdom of bullshit! A kingdom you've lived in for far too long. So don't tell me about not being real! I'm no less real than the fucking beef patty in your Big Mac. As far as you're concerned, Elliot, I am very real.” (Esmail, 2015, ep. 10)

It is implicitly stated, then, that what the viewers see may not be reality per se, but it is to Elliot, and that is the only reality that we are going to see, and the only one that matters in Elliot's story. After the exchange from above happens, Elliot closes his

eyes and tells himself that he needs to be alone. When he opens his eyes again the entire crowd is gone. In fact, he finds himself completely alone in the middle of Times Square, which should, by all means, still be bustling with activity. The lights are still on, but it is completely quiet until Mr. Robot, the mother, and child Elliot appear on a screen that would normally be playing an advertisement and start having a conversation with him. The strangeness of the situation, of a completely empty Times Square — one of the most hectic places in all of New York — that has become that way just because Elliot wished it, and the projection of the product of Elliot's DID on a big screen, it may all make the viewer think that Elliot was never there. But then again, he might have been, and since this is Elliot's story narrated from Elliot's point of view, and he lived that moment in Times Square, whether it really happened or not does not matter.

### **2.2.1.2. Soundtrack narration**

*Mr. Robot* is a show with voiceover narration, something common in audiovisual media, but with a little twist in this particular show: Elliot's narration is directed at who he calls an imaginary friend — in fact, the very first line of the show is “Hello, friend” (Esmail, 2015, ep. 1). It is a type of narration that often breaks the fourth wall, as it seems to address the audience directly; something that is not unheard of in the medium either, but the way Sam Esmail carries Elliot's narration out is, at times, seamlessly connected to the way in which he uses the visual elements of the show, and all of it is played through the frame of Elliot's gradually worsening mental state. While the visual distortion of reality does a lot to convey point of view, it only truly shines when combined with this unique style of narration and the strong script behind it.

Elliot narrates various things, namely most of the exposition or the insight into what he is feeling. However, there are points in which he uses the second person, addressing the audience directly to pull them into what is happening around him, into the fiction of the show. Sometimes it is simple and easily dismissed: “I'm talking to you right now and you don't exist” (Esmail, 2015, ep. 5), an allusion to the idea that the audience is another figment of his imagination just like Mr. Robot and the other hallucinations he suffers through are. Other times, Elliot becomes an insecure narrator, doubting the things he sees and asking his imaginary friend for reassurance. The last shot of the very first episode consists of Elliot looking straight into the camera and saying “Please tell me you're seeing this too” (Esmail, 2015, ep. 1). This is something

he does quite a lot when he distrusts himself and feels insecure about whether the things he sees are real or not, and that gives an extra layer of depth to the previously discussed distortion of reality that affects him as much as it affects the audience, because it pulls them farther into his point of view.

As imaginary friends usually are, the audience is a comfort to Elliot. However, as the season progresses and his mental state becomes increasingly fragile, turning him more and more paranoid, he starts antagonising this friend. His remarks towards the audience tend to be pleas for reassurance or companionship, or requests for this imaginary friend to withhold judgement on him. However, things change dramatically on episode 8, wherein a pivotal moment in Elliot's journey through his identity takes place: he remembers the existence of a sister he had completely forgotten about and he is at the height of his paranoia, his mind racing as he recalls all the childhood memories his brain locked out and tells himself he has gone crazy over and over again. As this happens, the camera suddenly changes from a static high quality shot to what seems like a less, for lack of a better word, professional one, like it was shot by Elliot himself with a mobile phone. Elliot stares right into it, very up close, and asks: "Are you freaking out? Tell me the truth. Were you in on this the whole time? Were you?!" (Esmail, 2015, ep. 8). That last "Were you?!" is an actual shout, not a voice-over narration but Elliot speaking it out loud. Suddenly that narration, which has been more of a one-sided dialogue for a while now, is broken out of its format and brought forth into the scene, into "reality". After shouting that, Elliot reaches over and physically pushes the camera down, making the image fade to black and transition into the next scene. In that same scene, he says "I'm out of my mind, I knew it. I should have never created you" (Esmail, 2015, ep. 8), as if he is physically and emotionally severing his connection to the imaginary friend — something fruitless, as he is unable to stop talking to them even after that point.

This is where this fairly standard first person narration really breaks the mold. The audience is another character: they are pulled into the reality of *Mr. Robot* physically by Elliot himself. The audience may be an imaginary friend in the narrative of the show but, as previously stated, what is or is not imaginary does not matter. What matters is Elliot's reality, what he perceives is what is shown, and since the audience is perceived by him, then they become a part of the reality of the show, not just by speech, and not just by him. In the end, the imaginary friend is the same type of existence than

Mr. Robot is: a part of Elliot's own mind. This, coupled with the fact that *Mr. Robot* is a show with a first person point of view, is why we see what he sees, perceive what he perceives and, at points, fear what he fears. The audience can become as paranoid as Elliot, and the show is directed to create that effect. An example of that would be on episode 9, right after Elliot has found out that Mr. Robot is a figment of his imagination with the appearance of his dead father. Mr. Robot comes to his apartment to talk things out and Elliot, very agitated, starts yelling that he has gone crazy and that this should not be happening. After Elliot screams "You are dead!", Mr. Robot looks directly into the camera, as if worried, and then tells Elliot "I suggest you lower your voice" before heading towards the window and looking down at the street. For the split second where he is looking at the camera, it seems as if Mr. Robot is worried about the audience hearing him, and when he says "You don't want them to hear us" (Esmail, 2015, ep. 9) afterwards it plays into the same idea. When Elliot goes to the window to check the street he sees a few men in black that have supposedly been following him for a long while, and later on we find out that Mr. Robot is not referring to them either, but to Darlene and Angela instead. However, this is all shot and edited in a way that provokes the audience's discomfort; because Elliot shook the camera and brought it down before, breaking the physical barrier between audience and fictional character, when Mr. Robot looks into the camera the audience is momentarily shaken, expecting something similar to happen again.

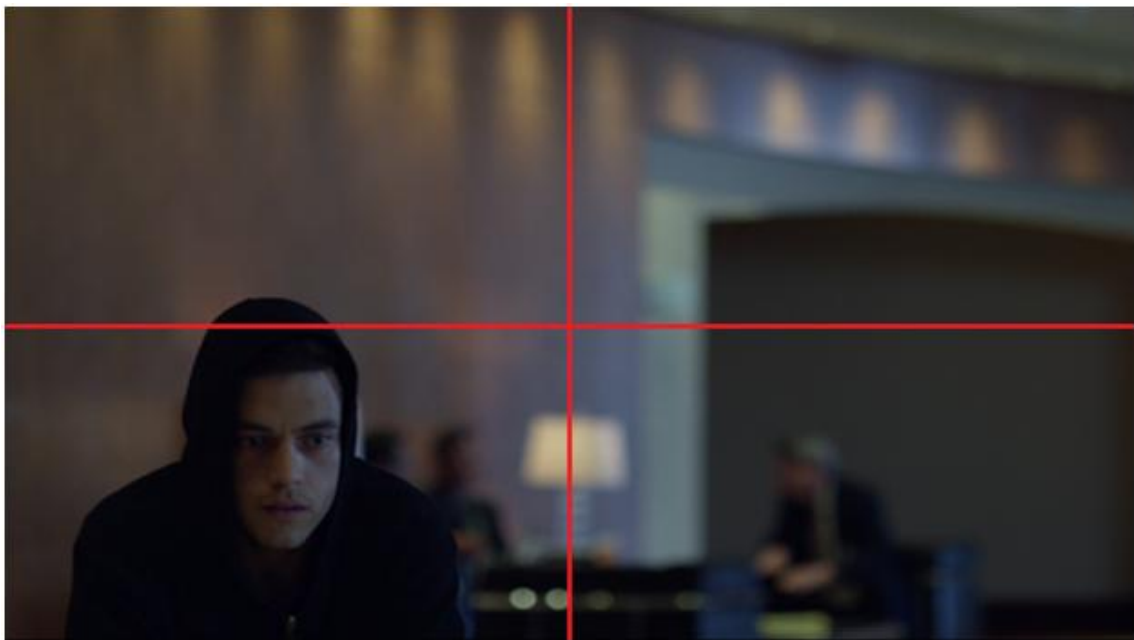
As difficult as conveying point of view in audiovisual media is, Sam Esmail achieves it by cleverly using the techniques — both narrative and visual — at his disposal when creating *Mr. Robot*. The audience could be affected by Elliot's mental state just because of his relatability as a character, but by being pulled into the narrative and sharing Elliot's fears, delusions and paranoia, they experience the story being told with a higher intensity.

### **2.2.2. Shot composition**

*Mr. Robot*, as every other audiovisual work, uses the rule of thirds to balance its framing and shot composition. The rule of thirds is a concept in photography that is used as a guideline for shot composition, and it divides the frame into nine subsections, using two horizontal lines and two vertical lines. The more important elements of the shot should be placed either on top of the lines or on their intersections. A very

important part of *Mr. Robot*'s visual style is how it uses the rule of thirds, or rather, how it subverts it into something that is now very visually distinctive.

To begin with, *Mr. Robot* does not use a division of nine different grids, and it seems to use four grids instead, dividing the frame with only a horizontal line and a vertical line. This is called quadrant framing, and it dominates every frame of the show. The most noticeable way in which it is used is when the subject of the shot is placed on a single quadrant, a technique that is used so frequently that it has become the standard look of the show.



**Figure 4.** Example of quadrant framing. Taken from episode 5 of *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015).

In *Mr. Robot*, quadrant framing is not only used to draw the attention of the viewer to a certain aspect of the frame, but also as a means of visual storytelling. For example, Elliot is a character that feels isolated from the society that surrounds him so many of the shots in which he is in an open or public space have him placed on a single quadrant, as if he was backed into a corner of the screen. In these instances, the negative space (concept in photography that describes the area which surrounds the main subject of the frame) is almost overpowering, which highlights the isolation that Elliot feels and how powerless he truly is against the society that surrounds and suffocates him.



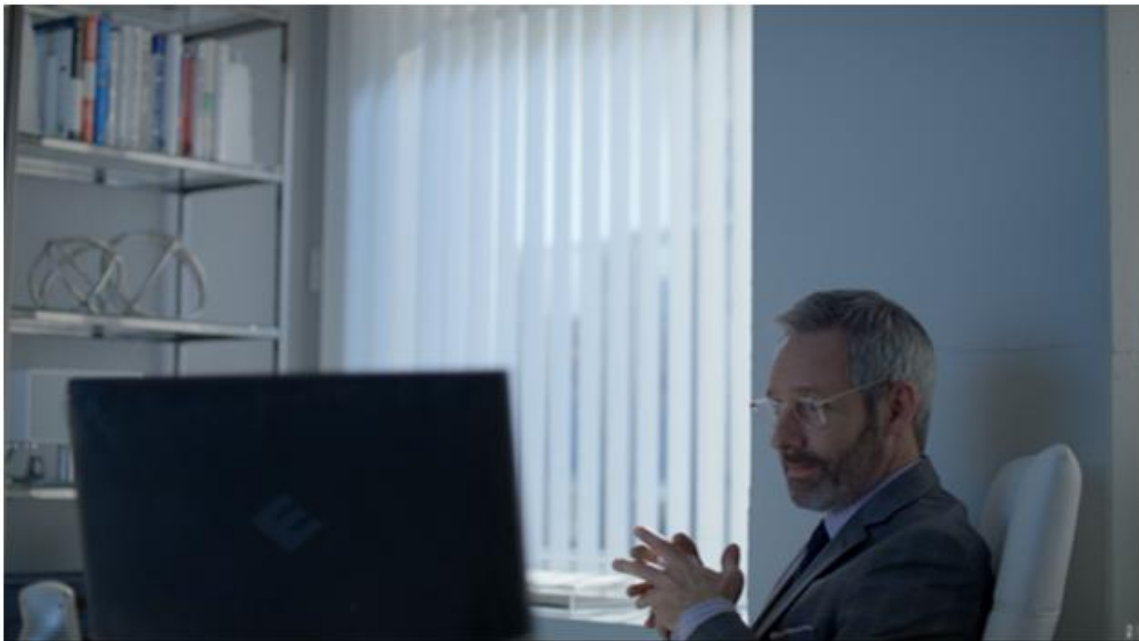


**Figure 5. Elliot on the street, situated in a corner of the screen with a lot of negative space surrounding him. Taken from episode 6 of *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015).**

Another interesting usage of this type of framing in *Mr. Robot* is when it is used in conversations between two characters. In more standard cinematography, when two characters are static and having a conversation, the screen is usually divided in a certain manner in the different shots. For example, let's say we have a wide shot of the characters in which one is positioned on the left side of the screen and the other on the right one. When there are cuts to individual close-up shots during the conversation, the character on the left will usually be hugging the left side of the screen, leaving some negative space on the right, and the character on the right side of the screen will be doing the opposite: hugging the right side, leaving space on the left. This is the standard because it is how conversations are usually had, with room to breathe between the people having it. However, regardless of the characters actually having that kind of space between them in a wide shot, *Mr. Robot's* conversations are usually carried out quite differently. For example, we may have the character on the left side hugging the right side of the screen on their close-up shot, and the character on the right side hugging the left side of the screen, and that kind of unique position is done not only to cause the audience a certain kind of discomfort, but to convey the flow of the conversation. A character that is hugging the side of the screen that would usually hold the negative space of the shot may, for example, have the upper hand in the conversation, be confrontational, or be lying. If the other character in the same instance is placed in the side of the screen that creates distance between them and the other

character, they may be more submissive in the conversation or they may have an open and trusting attitude.

To illustrate, let's take a conversation between Elliot and his boss, Gideon, on the second episode of the first season. Gideon calls Elliot to his office to talk about what happened in a meeting, and Gideon is positioned on the right side of the shot while Elliot is on the left side. Gideon is trying to be open and approachable, acting out of genuine concern for Elliot's well-being, so he is positioned on the bottom right quadrant, leaving a lot of open space between him and Elliot that shows his relaxed friendliness, but also the clear emotional distance between the two. Meanwhile, Elliot lies blatantly to Gideon, so he hugs the right side of the screen. The lack of negative space between them feels oppressive and unnatural, and makes it seem like Elliot is both uncomfortably close to Gideon but separated by a wall as well (the border of the screen itself). However, midway through the conversation, Gideon says something that Elliot did not expect to hear and that alters the flow of the conversation. Elliot is taken aback and he no longer keeps his guard up, he stops lying and just like that he is hugging the left side of the screen, leaving the negative space between him and Gideon as he starts showing genuine interest in the conversation and absorbs the information that Gideon gives him, making the distance between the two characters feel more natural.



**Figure 6.** Gideon trying to have an open conversation with Elliot, hugging the right side of the screen. Taken from episode 2 of *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015).



**Figure 7.** Elliot being guarded and lying as he talks to Gideon. Taken from episode 2 of *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015).



**Figure 8.** Elliot after he stops lying in that same conversation, hugging the opposite side of the screen. Taken from episode 2 of *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015).

Another interesting instance of this technique happens in episode 4, in a scene where the members of F Society are discussing their plans. A fellow hacker named Romero shows skepticism towards Elliot's strategy and deems it too risky, so they have a confrontation about it. As they argue, they are both hugging the side of screen closer to the other character, and the negative space is left behind them. In this instance, they are so close to the edge of the screen that a sense of tension and discomfort is created

with their positioning, conveying both Romero's aggressiveness and Elliot's anxiety at being forced into that situation. Romero is especially close to the edge, so close that you can see a bit of Elliot's face, showing that he is more secure in himself than Elliot and that he has the upper hand in the exchange.



**Figure 9. Romero confronting Elliot. Taken from episode 4 of *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015).**



**Figure 10. Elliot in that same conversation. Taken from episode 4 of *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015).**

However, the framing of *Mr. Robot* is not only used to showcase the flow of conversations, the dynamics between characters and Elliot's moment-to-moment feelings, but it also foreshadows certain aspects of the story and, most notably, the true

identity of Mr. Robot, Elliot's alternate personality. There is a tendency in the show to put visual barriers that separate Elliot from the rest of the world, all alluding to the way in which Elliot builds walls around himself as a defence mechanism and constantly pushes other people away from him. However, most of the times where he and Mr. Robot are in the same frame during the first half of the season, they are seen to be isolated from the rest of the world together, something that might allude to both Mr. Robot being Elliot's only true ally during those early episodes and to the fact that Elliot and Mr. Robot are the same person. Let's take two examples: the first one happens at the end of the second episode, in a conversation that Mr. Robot and Elliot have on a railing of a public space. They are physically separated from the people walking around by a building structure that is open, and there is a visual sense of isolation between them and the rest of the world by the amount of negative space around them, since they are crammed into the lower-right quadrant of the screen.



**Figure 11. Elliot and Mr. Robot talking, isolated from the rest of the world via framing. Taken from episode 2 of Mr. Robot (Esmail, 2015).**





**Figure 12. Different shot of that same scene, showing another angle that still separates them from the other people on the street. Taken from episode 2 of *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015).**

The other example is more blatant, a scene in which Mr. Robot and Elliot are speaking in a bar. The shot composition for the conversation is carried out in usual *Mr. Robot* fashion, but there is a particular fixed angle that the camera keeps turning to in which a beer dispenser draws a clear line between Elliot and Mr. Robot and the rest of the world. Every time we're shown this particular, deliberate shot, they are both in the same side of the separation. Mr. Robot gets up to leave at one point, but when he does so Elliot follows, and when the scene cuts back to that specific shot, they have crossed the threshold that that dispenser represents together, all as if they are one and the same. The conversation they are having in this scene is more of an argument than anything else, and yet, they are still united.



Figure 13. Elliot and Mr. Robot on one side of the visual barrier. Taken from episode 3 of *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015).

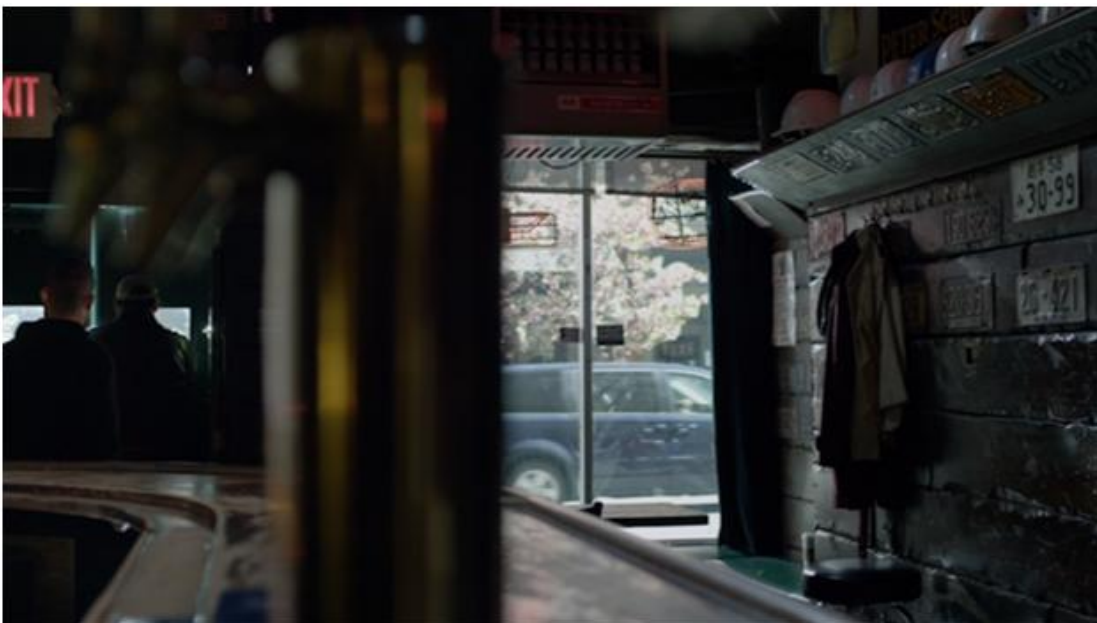


Figure 14. Elliot and Mr. Robot, having crossed the barrier together. Taken from episode 3 of *Mr. Robot* (Esmail, 2015).

These are only a few examples of how *Mr. Robot*'s iconic framing assists the story that is being told. The show's every shot is deliberate in the way it accompanies the narrative and adds onto it, making a very effective use of every aspect of the medium to tell Elliot's story, and make it immersive for the audience.

### 3. Conclusions

The stories that have always left the biggest impression on me have not necessarily been those with the most original or cohesive narrative, but those that have made a brilliant use of the medium they are created with. An author with a solid knowledge of the tools they are working with and the creativity to play with those tools can create a work that is not only deeply compelling and incredibly memorable, but also fun to dissect and analyse. A work that makes its audience feel like it could only have the impact it has in the medium it has been created is not particularly uncommon, but it is still something to be praised and remembered.

*Fight Club* and *Mr. Robot* could be praised for their riveting storylines and painfully relatable characters, and rightfully so, but what sets them apart from other texts with similar qualities is how carefully and skilfully they are crafted. It could be argued that *Mr. Robot* took inspiration from *Fight Club*, that the plot twist of Mr. Robot's identity has been done before and that it has been experienced by many people, especially when taking into account the popularity of the *Fight Club* 1999 film adaptation. However, a story with a plot point that has been done before is not necessarily poor. Considering how many stories have already been written, the idea of telling a completely original story is almost outlandish, so what can truly elevate a story is how it is carried out. *Fight Club* and *Mr. Robot* are carried out in different, but equally brilliant ways. The same kind of plot twist is foreshadowed in a different manner with a clever use of the tools of two exceedingly dissimilar media; a similar identity struggle is portrayed with techniques that may borrow something from the other medium (like *Fight Club*'s jump-cut-like style or *Mr. Robot*'s first person narration), but are separate from one another. These details are what make these two similar stories become very different artistic experiences.

This paper only scratches the surface of the experiences that a novel like *Fight Club* and a television show like *Mr. Robot* have to offer, and even more so of what the true storytelling potential of their respective media is. It is only an analysis that highlights the strengths of these texts and what makes them impactful and iconic experiences for their respective audiences. Because, in the end, it is the technicalities that separate these experiences from one another and, by focusing on these technicalities, new ways of looking at these stories – and many others – can emerge.



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